



REMNANTS

a record of our survival...

DANIEL POWELL

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DISTILLATIONS PRESS

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Cover design by Canopy Studios

Interior layout by Distillations Press

Kindle Edition

ASIN: B00D6VG5RW (Distillations Press)

But anyway, Dad's theory of halves assumes that maybe 50% of the population contracted the blight. That created a very difficult social dynamic, of course, because that means that the other half of the population immediately became food.

~ Allie Keane

The blight fell across the face of the world like a shroud. It mutated so quickly that the virologists never really had a chance.

America sealed its borders, but it was too late. By the time the first North American cannibalism clusters surfaced in Montreal, Winnipeg, and Vancouver, the blight was already incubating in many northern cities.

A dozen weeks later, everything was gone.

And yet, survivors *have* persisted. This is the story of the Keanes—an ordinary American family from what used to be Portland, Oregon—and their not-so-ordinary story of survival in the face of unthinkable human depravity.

Chapter One: Making Contact

It rains a lot more around here in the fall, but that's actually a good thing. Dad says it makes it harder for the blight to spread, which means that we're just a little bit safer. Billy and I don't have to stay so close to home in the fall, and even though the rain is cold and neither of us care for bundling up, it's much better to go out with Dad on his trips than it is to stay cooped up inside the cabin all day.

We walk everywhere, Billy and Dad and me, saving the little bit of fuel that we have left in case we have to make another run into Portland. We'd last gone into the city back in June, after Dad had been bitten by a rattlesnake while fishing on the banks of the Columbia River. We'd had to trade our last two chickens for treatment, but that didn't bother us so much.

There would be other chickens someday, but there was only one Dad.

It's true that we mostly stay out of the city, but we *have* been leaving the safety of the mountain and going into Sandy and Eagle Creek a lot more often lately. We search for things that might be useful, things we can carry home, things that haven't been touched by the blight.

And we've been looking for Mom, too.

I can tell that Billy and Dad both miss her, but I just can't imagine that they miss her as much as I do. Sometimes, I feel like I'm just a tiny part of who I used to be, and that the big part that's missing is Mom.

She used to keep my hair in braids. Boy, you don't realize how nice that is until you don't wear them much anymore (and I don't blame Dad for not knowing a lot about hair; he has other things on his mind—*that's* for sure—but at least he tries from time to time). Mom used to sing to me throughout the day, and she read me a story every single night. Even after the blight flashed through Oregon like a wildfire, she was still a really, *really* good mom.

I say a prayer every night that we'll find her and that she'll come back to the cabin with us. She knows where it is, of course. But she left because she felt that she had to. She thought she was...well, I guess she thought that she was showing symptoms.

I don't really know what to think about that. Well, that's not true all the way, I guess. I have a little bit of a different theory about it.

I think she left because she didn't like to see Billy and me so hungry all the time. Right before, Mom just stopped eating with us. It was like she didn't feel like it was okay anymore, kind of like every bite she took was one less for Billy and me. Dad begged her to stay with us, but when the vomiting started, I guess he felt that he had

to let her go. I think he was scared that she might actually have the blight, but that didn't stop him from hugging her. I'll never forget the way Dad held her—squeezing her so close while her body quivered with that terrible fever. He was crying, Dad was. It's the only time we've ever seen him do that, and it scared me and Billy bad.

I hope I never see it again. Dads aren't supposed to feel so sad.

Billy's kind of like Dad. He thinks Mom was contagious, but if that was true, why hasn't Dad gotten sick? I mean, he was *holding* her, and that's all it takes with the blight...

We've been combing through what's left of Sandy, just picking our way through the outskirts of downtown. It's tiring, always worrying about what might be out there. And honestly, there's just about nothing useful left to gather. We found a big cachet of canned peas about a week ago. When Dad got them open, the three of us just about passed out, the stench was so bad. He said that some air must have gotten into the cans, so we had to throw them all out.

It's really a shame, because we haven't had anything green to eat in an awfully long time.

Is this getting through out there? Is anyone reading this?

I'm curious, because I can only log onto the X-NET in spurts. There was a huge void in information after the Internet went away, of course, but people are obviously making a fresh go of it somewhere with this X-NET deal. Some entire sites have even been recovered, and Dad thinks it's probably helping those leading any recovery efforts that might be taking place.

Sometimes we have electricity. Most of the time we don't, but that's okay. We've adjusted. Our home is secure, and I don't write this journal from the cabin anyway. There's no sense in tipping our location, and I'm fine with making the hike to a workable hot zone.

We found this computer in an abandoned R.V. just outside of the old Foster Farms. Well, Dad found it. He was the only one that went inside, and when he came back out he had this computer and some shampoo and a small bag of brown rice and a *very* pale complexion. He stuffed the computer in my pack, told me that it was mine to keep, and then he got really sick behind the R.V.

The blight has that effect on people. I'm glad I didn't have to go inside and, even though he won't admit it, I'm sure that Billy was too.

Anyways, the computer works. I hacked the password and found an X-NET connection almost immediately. Dad says my technical skills are "the birthright of our generation." It's funny, because he's doing the exact same thing that I'm doing here, only he records his thoughts in an old paper notebook.

Dad's kind of analog.

The power comes and it goes in rolling surges. We'll get three hours here, and then two days off; two days on, then nothing for a week. There's no sense in trying to predict it, so we just make use of it when we can.

I'm taking Dad's advice and just writing. It was what I did before the blight came to Oregon, and it's what I'll do now. Mrs. Cranston always said that I was the best writer in class, and I don't think she was just saying it to be nice. Trust me, I've read some of classmates' essays. Mrs. Cranston had a lot of patience.

By the way, is *anybody* reading this? It'd sure be nice to know if this is actually making it out there...

Sooo, what else? Oh, yeah—our family. My name is Allie (short for Allison) May Keane. My parents are Marjorie Diane Keane and Clifford Dawson Keane, and my brother is William Dawson Keane. Dawson is a family name, of course, and one day I will pass it along to my own children.

I will be thirteen in January.

What else? Oh, I used to attend Oregon Episcopal School. I liked it, and I miss school an awful lot. Billy's almost giddy that the schools are in shambles, but Dad says he can't see much of a future unless we can get them back up and running.

Dad is *waaay* smart, by the way. He's an engineer, and he's the one that was able to find the cabin and get everything wired up correctly so that the electricity works.

Mom's pretty amazing herself. She taught environmental science at Portland State, which is another reason Dad and Billy think that she might have actually been sick—that maybe she knew that the virus that causes the blight had taken hold in her bloodstream, and that she could turn on us at any time.

Still, I'm just not buying it. I have to keep my hopes up, right? I mean, if I lose *that*, what else is left? Besides, I don't care how sick Mom might be—she would *never* turn on any of us.

Not in a million years.

So anyway, back to the family. Billy is my older brother. He's awesome too, even though we sometimes fight. Billy was a freshman at Central Catholic. He was a star on the soccer team, even though he was only a freshman. Also, Billy's just a big old softie at heart, but he puts up a brave face. He'd absolutely do whatever it took to keep me safe, and I love him for that.

So that's pretty much it for now. I'll post here as much as I can—and as often as the power allows.

If there's anybody out there with a working X-NET connection, I'd sure like to hear from you...

Three days without the juice. Dad thinks the people down at BPA are rationing it, but there's really no telling how the electricity is being dispersed. We don't even know if there *are* people down at BPA. Maybe the whole place is just running on autopilot, and that's why it's impossible to detect a pattern. Maybe the water just tumbles through those big old turbines all day and all night, and then when it builds up to capacity, the system vents a surplus and we get the juice for a day or two.

Who knows?

Sometimes, on clear nights, the three of us hike over to the lookout and peer out at the city. Most nights, Portland is pretty dim. Yesterday, though, the lights came on right in front of us. Bam—the place lit up a like a Christmas tree! It was really cool to see that.

So, I think I'll take Dad's advice with this little writing space that I've carved out here. He thinks I should be making a record—that instead of just trying to connect with others (by the way, did anybody read this? *Hello!?*), I should also be trying to document what's happening. I like the idea, and that's what I've decided to do.

I digitized an old painting that Dad found in the cabin's bedroom for the header. It was pretty and it was hopeful, so I decided to use it. Then, I came up with that title. I think it fits.

We (and by that I mean the three of us and maybe you, if there is any “you” out there reading this) are the remnants, and this is our record.

Speaking of remnants, it's kind of hard to put *that* idea into perspective, but Dad told us yesterday that we should think about everything that's happened in terms of halves. He said that's how situations like this work—and he used a funny term for it.

Dieback.

There you have it—not exactly a hopeful word, is it?

Anyway, it was hard at first for me to wrap my brain around what he was saying, but now it makes some sense. Dad said that all populations (from amoebas all the way up to human beings, and everything in between) have what he calls a carrying capacity. When things get too large, certain natural factors have a way of placing things back into balance.

In our case, it's the blight that's doing that. Like I said, it's kind of hard for me to think in halves. When I think about all of my friends at OES, I hate the possibility that half of them are gone, and that the other half might be...well, more on that later.

Nobody, and I mean *nobody*, was prepared to handle the blight. It tore out of Asia, ravaged most of Europe, then cascaded down over America from Canada, where the first cannibalism clusters surfaced in Montreal, Winnipeg, and Vancouver. The United

States shuttered its borders immediately, but those Canadian cities were too darned close. Dad thinks that there might be large pockets of uninfected survivors further south—he's been reading the X-NET a lot when the power is up—but we can't be sure.

What we *do* know is that Portland isn't safe, and that Seattle is gone.

But anyway, Dad's theory of halves assumes that maybe 50% of the population contracted the blight. That created a very difficult social dynamic, of course, because that means that the other half of the population immediately became food.

Yes, you read that correctly. It's why the media called them "cannibalism clusters" early on.

And before you roll your eyes about zombies, you have to understand that's not what we're talking about here.

Cannibalism?

Afraid so.

Zombies?

Not quite.

Although the fever *did* make many of the affected sluggish, there was no loss of cognition (another of Dad's terms, but I already knew it from school anyway) among the blighted. There was no death—no stilled heartbeats. There was no mindless shambling, no searching for human brains.

No, we're actually talking about *calculated* shambling here, folks.

Sorry—bad joke. I couldn't resist. The thing is, the affected simply underwent a *change* in constitution. No more chicken. No more broccoli. No more apples (man, just writing that word down here makes my stomach growl), no more pork, and no more bread.

Just...well, just other people.

When the President admitted that *she* had contracted the virus, she immediately ceded her office to the VP. When he admitted that *he* had it...well, things went downhill pretty quickly from there. I can't imagine where they are now, although I'm sure there's no shortage of food for them. The VIPs, as I understand it, are still eating well.

You see, that's the problem. The blighted are smart (as smart as they ever were before, anyway) and they're also hungry. Ravenous, in some cases.

So, if half get infected and the other half becomes food, you can see the inequality, right? Once you begin to cull the herd, some of the blighted starve. There goes another half.

And so on. And so forth.

And then there were the conscientious infected. Hundreds of thousands of people simply starved to death. The specter of devolving, of doing such terrible things to other human beings, was just too much to bear. When the blight swept across the face of the world, many preferred to wait peacefully for the end rather than attack their families, their neighbors, their fellow man.

And many more took their own lives before hunger even entered into the equation. I often think about what I might do if I get infected someday.

I'd like to think I could be that brave.

Famine farms popped up in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Miami—heck, all over the country...all over the world! Whole families, infected by the blight, reported to the farms to die together. A man in Buffalo wrote a story on the X-NET claiming that the smoke from the bodies they were burning at the football stadium in New Jersey carried on the wind, clear up to Niagara Falls.

And so there you have it. The dieback has begun, and it's now a question of reaching equilibrium. Dad says that, barring a medical miracle and the capacity to reverse what has happened to the blighted, the process will sort itself out eventually, but probably not in our lifetimes—and that's even if Billy and me live to be a hundred.

But like I said, not everybody was content to report to the famine farms. Many, many of the blighted have adapted to their new reality. Dad believes that there are more of them than there are of us. They live together, and they are organized. Dad says that, at least in the early going, they hold the advantage. You see, there's been no military response on our side. There's been no formal reaction *at all* by the ones who rema...uh, oh...just had a little flicker there.

I'm saving and posting this right now. Back online soon, I hope...

Chapter Two: Gathering and Searching and Finding Others

Well, hello there again, X-NET! We've gone almost a week without the juice. I could have logged on with the battery but, as you'll learn a little bit later in this post, I used most of my battery power in making an audio recording.

I've always enjoyed plugging in and logging on, by the way. It's like pulling up a digital crab pot—you never know what you might find (hey, maybe Dad's on to something about that technical birthright stuff)...

But darn it, still no contacts yet! I have faith, though, that there *are* others out there, and that some are maybe even reading what I write here.

Where does that faith come from, you might ask?

Well, we just met another group of survivors. It's been more than a month since I've even *seen* another soul, and a few weeks since Dad has, but we finally had a real, in-the-flesh encounter!

This happened back in Sandy, four days ago. We'd cleared most of the western end of town, with Dad marking each building off on a checklist he'd been keeping, and we were making our way through what we thought was pretty much an abandoned Elks Lodge. We'd found some stale instant coffee and half a bag of hard cinnamon candy that Billy and I were pretty much salivating over, but that Dad was holding onto for safe keeping.

It was a big place—big enough to have an auditorium that had basketball hoops and racks of metal folding chairs. There was even a stage, and that's where we found them. They had drawn the curtains, hoping to remain hidden, but it's pretty much impossible to hide a baby's cry.

What we found was a young couple (John and Carrie) and their newborn baby and Carrie's brother, Ben. The baby's name is Marianne.

Pretty neat, huh?

When the baby started bawling, John immediately stepped out from behind the curtain. He had *two* pistols, and Dad knelt down slowly and put his shotgun on the ground and his hands in the air. Billy put his revolver down, too, and we did like Dad and raised our hands.

"Are you infected?" John called down at us. "Do you have the blight? Be honest now, or I will *cut you down* where you stand!"

It wasn't the usual test, but this wasn't the usual encounter. John had to keep his distance, and asking us to eat isn't exactly the first thing on anyone's mind when the hammers are cocked, if you know what I mean.

"No," Dad replied. He shook his head slowly from side to side. "We're clean—I promise. We've been drinking from a well and wearing gloves."

I wiggled my fingers in support of his point; they were sheathed in plastic. We'd been lucky in that regard. Mom had had six boxes of disposables at home—an occupational necessity with some of the labs that she taught—and we wore them whenever we went into Sandy.

John lowered the pistols, and that's when Ben drew the curtain and we saw poor Carrie and her tiny daughter. Marianne couldn't have been much more than a few weeks old. Carrie had tears on her cheeks. I can't imagine how scared she must have been, holding her child like that and never knowing if we were blighted—or if we had come to take her baby girl away.

And that's how we stumbled across another group of survivors. I don't mind mentioning it here that we discovered each other at the Elks Lodge, because they're long gone now. We all walked out of that place together. They were heading east (or *were* they? ha, ha!), where Carrie thought she might still have some family.

But before they departed, we shared a meal together. Ben's a bow-hunter, you see, and he had managed to kill a pair of seagulls just a few hours before we showed up. We built a little fire out behind the lodge, too overcome with hunger to care much about whether the blighted might notice the smoke.

Besides, it was nice just being with others for a change. Having a cookout felt—I don't know, it just felt like the right thing to do. Maybe it was dangerous, but it was pretty clear to me that we all needed it.

And we had weapons. If the blighted came, we would deal with it.

So we roasted the gulls, and Dad shared around the crumbled remains of the last three protein bars that he'd been holding onto for a special occasion. We ate the candy too. My stomach has shrunk over these last few months and, even though I only had a couple of ounces of food, I can't remember the last time I felt that full.

It was *sooo* nice, let me tell you. We sat near the fire, warming our hands in the drizzle, and we ate and we talked.

Billy and me put the fire out when we were finished and we helped them get their things together. That's when the talk turned to the blighted.

"They actually have a market now up in Seattle," John said, the disgust plain in his voice. He had a little tin of tobacco—Lord only knows where he managed to get *that*, what with all of the grocery stores and gas stations as empty as they are—and he put

a pinch in his cheek. He offered some to Dad and Billy, but Dad refused. Billy looked like he wanted some, but one look from Dad changed those plans pretty quickly.

“I’m serious,” John continued. “They’re...they’re selling it right out there in the open.”

Carrie never looked up from her infant daughter while her husband spoke. The rest of us looked elsewhere—overcome with revulsion by what he’d said.

A market? Holy sheesh. That meant they were processing it...

“It’s true,” Ben added. “I was there just a few months back. Heck, I barely made it out of Olympia alive. The blighted were going door to door. They were processing whole groups of survivors. I caught a ride with some carrot munchers down to Vancouver, but I walked the rest of the way to Salem to meet up with Carrie and John. I’ve seen a total of four vehicles on the road since, but I haven’t had the guts to put a thumb in the air. Heck, I hide every single time.”

Dad nodded. “We had to leave too. We had a house in Portland—up near the zoo—but we’ve been on the mountain here since April.”

“It seems quiet,” John said. He spat on the smoldering coals. John has a slight build, but he looks pretty tough to me. Things weren’t going to end well for any blighted trying to get to his little girl—I can tell you that. “You folks...are you actually *safe* here?”

Dad shrugged. “We’ve managed, so far at least. You’re the first person I’ve spoken with in about three weeks, John. The last one was an old man I met in a hardware store. He was binding a nasty puncture wound in his foot with electrical tape.

“Sandy’s been pretty much picked over, but we’ve had some luck around Eagle Creek. Allie, you want to show him what we found?”

I pulled out the laptop, smiling as I gave my confession. “I hope you don’t mind,” I told him, “but I’ve been recording all of this—at least everything since you let my Dad and brother pick up their guns. I’m...well, I’m keeping a record.”

John grinned at me. “A record? What do you mean?”

I explained it to him, and I told him about the X-NET. He just shook his head in amazement while I spoke. “Be careful,” he warned me, eyes wide. “You just be careful about how you use that thing, Allie. If the grid comes back on to stay, then you can be pretty certain of just *who* got it up and running. There are just so many more of them than there are of us right now. And I hate the thought of that thing leading them straight to your doorstep.”

I nodded. “I’m careful. It’s encrypted, and I never log on from the cabin. Can I...can I please take your picture, John? I mean, for the journal?”

“Nah, I’m sorry, kid,” John said. “We’d rather not. We want to stay under the radar—as far under it as we can. In fact, I’ll be honest with you folks. This situation that we’re in? I’m thinking it’s pretty much permanent. There was some talk of medical testing, supposedly coming out of Bethesda or the Pentagon or someplace back east. These were medical trials coming out of the military—some kind of vaccine that was supposed to stop the blight dead in its tracks. But I can’t be sure. Nobody can. It’s all a bunch of hearsay now, folks. Just whispers on the wind, and most of it probably dead wrong to boot.”

We helped Ben and John shrug into their packs. Carrie, who hadn’t said much of anything to us at all, had the baby secured in a sling against her chest, bundled beneath a waterproof jacket. We were walking with them, heading east, when we heard the roar of the convoy.

“Go!” Dad hissed at Billy and me—pointing to the fire-blackened shell of an old pop-up camper. “Get behind that camper—now, kids! Go!”

We did as we were told, and Ben and Carrie came with us. I peeked out from beneath the camper’s wheels and caught sight of them. Dad and John knelt behind a thick juniper shrub. Just twenty feet beyond their position, a series of military vehicles rumbled right down the center of the Mt. Hood Highway. Trucks and hummers. They were decked out in tan camouflage, but each bore an odd insignia on its side—sprayed there with red paint.

If the power holds up, I might try my hand at drawing it and posting it here later on.

I got down on my tummy and counted tires. Nine vehicles later, the convoy had passed.

Dad and John met up with us behind the camper. “We’ve got to get straight home, kids,” he said to us. There was fear in his voice, and it kicked my pulse up another notch.

Carrie and John shared a glance. It was heartbreaking. I could tell that she wanted to come with us. But John...I’m not sure what it was I saw in his face. Pride, maybe? Anger? Willfulness?

I’d like to think that Dad would help them, but I’m glad that they never asked. I know it sounds selfish, but we were barely holding on as it was. How could we take on a baby? The cabin already feels cramped, and what would happen when Mom comes home?

“No, honey,” John said. He reached over and tucked a wisp of Carrie’s hair behind her ear. “No. We need to stick to the plan. Let’s just get out to your dad’s place and see how things look from there, okay?”

Carrie was crying again, and John pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her. He let her cry for a long moment before whispering something in her ear. She stiffened, nodded her head, and wiped her eyes—her resolve replenished.

I'm pretty hopeful for these folks.

Dad pressed the tattered copy of our only map into their hands. It had notes all over it, and it was coming apart along the seams, but still—it was a danged *map*.

"Thank you," John said. He shook Dad's hand and tucked it into his jacket. "God be with you and your family, Clifford. You take good care of these kids."

"Will do," Dad said. "Be safe."

We watched them go, and then we came home and spent the last three days munching on salmonberries, ferns, and the last of our canned goods. The battery died—drained by my recording—and we were too scared to do anything much more than sit around and read and play scrabble and gin rummy. Dad went out for firewood a few times, but the pickings are slim with all of this wet weather.

Oh yeah, I forgot to mention that it's rained every day. A lot.

And so now you know what we know which, having typed all this out here, really doesn't feel like an awful lot.

But still—*something* seems to be happening here. There *are* others out there, and they're on the move. They have vehicles, and they seem organized.

I guess the real question is, whose side are they on?

Chapter three: How did we get here?

Dad says that any record worth its salt should cover everything from the very start, so please accept my apologies if I've skipped over some important stuff here. Sometimes, you get down to writing and any thoughts about a plan just fly right out the window.

Sooo...I'll just take a few minutes here and try to go back to the start of this whole mess. The X-NET seems to be gathering a little bit more momentum every time I log back on. Dad and Billy have helped me make a timeline, and we've even been able to find some of the original news stories that covered the blight through the years. The social networks are still in shambles (and we haven't found any new evidence of Mom out there, although we did run across one of her old PSU profiles, and I saw Dad tear up a little bit when he saw her picture there), but some sites are coming back online. Just this morning, in fact, a skeletal version of the old U.S. Government website showed up. It was pretty neat to be able to go back in there and search through some of the old archives. I even found a satellite map of Portland's West Hills—it was a trip seeing the old neighborhood again, and utterly without the fires that had knocked the place down into a pile of ashes!

Dad says that whoever's responsible for the X-NET must have some serious techie chops, and access to some big-time computing firepower. The Internet got pretty spotty when the blight walloped Europe, but it simply disappeared altogether when the big server farms in California and Oregon bit the dust.

We're talking the ultimate *Error 404* here, folks.

Part of it was the splintered workforce (I mean, who cares about keeping the servers running when your co-worker's looking at you like you're a pork chop, right?), but the naturalists also played a big role.

The naturalists, by the way, had really destructive factions on *both* sides. I suppose that was one area where people could find some common ground: the dissolution of society as we had come to know it.

So, how can I describe what's left? Well, Sandy is utterly deserted, as far as we can tell. That's pretty much par for the course.

There *is* no society.

There are homes, of course. They're filled with dishes, pictures, furniture, televisions—all the usual stuff that people had before, but have no need for now. Heck, without a working telecom network, there isn't even any use for phones. Mine's somewhere back in the cabin, but wrap your brain around *that* one—future anthropologists and current (I guess nonexistent) readers of this here X-NET.

Those little things were practically surgically attached to us. I mean, you couldn't go anywhere without seeing people checking their phones *all* the time. There was this great video of this lady that walked right into a fountain at the mall while checking something on her phone (I looked for it but, alas, that little gem hasn't yet been restored to the X-NET).

But all of that is gone now. In less than a year, the telephone became a quaint relic. Dad says it's about as useful as a pet rock, whatever that is.

The same thing happened to society. In just less than a year, Sandy went from a cute little town of 10,000 people to a looted husk with maybe a few hundred refugees hiding out and subsisting on whatever they could scavenge. We don't have it much better up here on the mountain, but at least we have protection. We'll know if somebody's close, and Dad got the juice running, so at least there's that, right?

But let me get back to the naturalists. Sorry about that. In the worst months of the dieback (can't *not* use that word now, can I?), people weren't just at each other's throats—they were unraveling the very threads of what it meant to live together in a society. Billy said he once saw a full-grown man push a little girl out of her spot at one of the Mt. Tabor food lines. This was back when there was still a regional response—back when ordinary citizens showed up to swap germs and war stories while standing in line for a few loaves of sourdough.

Holy sheesh, were we ever stupid.

The unrest took many forms, and the naturalists just loved it. They were mostly anarchists. Dad said that they wanted a complete return, all the way back to square one—to a notion that the physically strong, and not the wealthiest, would survive. There were these brutal attacks in New York, Atlanta, and Houston. They burned down the CNN studios and they pulled J.P. Morgan's headquarters apart, brick by brick, to hear Dad tell it.

At the same time, they were marshaling their efforts in computing. When the world's leading security systems fell, hackers drained the Royal Bank of Canada and evenly redistributed billions among the world's population.

But who needed it? It was a symbolic gesture, but one that was powerful, according to Dad.

Money wasn't worth anything by then. The naturalists, both blighted and healthy, had seen to that.

And this isn't to say that there aren't places out there that aren't trying to hold things together. When we took the truck into Portland to get Dad's leg treated, we saw just such a place. I won't get into it here, but there are pockets of healthy people, good old remnants, living with each other, defending each other, and trying to carve out a life amidst the rubble.

Wow. This is getting long, and I haven't even really started. I think this is where Mrs. Cranston would grab that trusty red pen of hers and scribble *Get on with it!* in the margins of my rough draft.

So I need to warn you: some of these stories are disturbing. How could they be anything but that though, right? Dad and me went through a bunch of sites and, after sifting through some of the content that's been restored, we tried to pick the stuff that seemed most credible.

I was really small when the first [signs that something was happening](#) started to show up in the news. Not that I'm much more than a kid now, but situations like ours have a way of...well, of hastening the old maturation process, I guess. The truth is that I kind of went from playing with Barbies to hiding from cannibals, and there really hasn't been much time in between to enjoy just being a kid.

I was in elementary school when that story first aired on the news. I don't remember it, but Billy and Dad both do. They knew about [this one](#), and [this one](#), too. There were tons of different theories on why all of this crazy stuff might be happening, but get a load of [this one](#) (the callout below is from the story, if you don't want to click through):

What caused this recent outbreak of attacks? Some have blamed the drug "bath salts," others have claimed it was caused by the LBQ-79 virus. The girlfriend of the Miami cannibal said he was under the control of a voodoo curse.

I guess it got to the point where the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention even [built their own site](#).

But the thing I want you to pay close attention to is that virus listed above: LBQ-79. That's not the virus that causes the blight, but it *was* the blight's precursor—an ancestor that mutated at least six times before scientists couldn't keep up with their jobs and had to, like the rest of us, take to the hills, so to speak (Dad calls it "going to the mattresses," although I don't really get that one).

Here's [a picture](#) of what the LBQ-79 became. It looks pretty innocent, right? Like a couple of jellyfish, or maybe some kid's Photoshop homework from school...

Maybe the virologists have named it. Maybe it's got some long, scientific name with a bunch of numbers and letters and dashes, and the big brains in the white coats have petri dishes stuffed with the thing, just sitting on freezer shelves in secret underground laboratories.

Maybe they do, but really...who cares?

To us, it's just the blight.

It starts with a low-grade fever before manifesting as nausea, vomiting, excessive salivation, and uncontrollable weeping. I remember standing in line at Safeway, back at the beginning, and being stunned because all around me, people were crying. And

it wasn't just a little snuffle here and there—we're talking crocodile tears. Blubbering, is how Billy put it.

But the poor blighted person's temperature climbs and climbs. Rupturing is not uncommon (Mom had a pretty bad nosebleed right before she left). Delirium is usually the last stop on the way to a temporary coma state. The blighted lose consciousness for a period of about forty-eight hours or so. And when they wake up, their appetites have changed.

That's how you know it's in you, you see. People used to call it the carrot test. Just put a veggie in front of one of the blighted and wait for the reaction. If they made it through the coma, you pretty much knew, but if they couldn't choke down a vegetable, then it was time to leave the area.

There were stories coming out of [Europe](#) and [Asia](#) about some terrible stuff happening, but we were so insulated from all of that in America that it didn't really register. Dad says Americans were too busy with trivial things to adequately prepare for what was coming, and after all—it was pretty tough to believe.

Cannibalism? Yeah, right...

But like I said before, things moved quickly after what happened in Canada. The networks—you have to give 'em credit—tried to cover it right up until the end. I couldn't find it, but there was this terrible video of an on-air attack on the replacement hosts on the *Today Show*. The blighted just streamed into the studio and ripped the place apart, right while they were doing the weather in between the latest updates on the blight.

After that, most newscasters worked from home.

The markets tumbled. The banks failed. The infrastructure crumbled—I mean, I haven't heard an airplane in at least two months.

Dad calls it provincialism. People banded together, leaving the cities. The blighted took advantage of the empty cities and fire, that age-old tool of conquest, was used to ferret out the stragglers. Our old neighborhood is gone (Dad and Billy have gone back twice; Mom and me went back the first time with them, but it had been burned to the ground when the guys made their second trip), and so are most of the others. Multnomah Village, Sellwood, Mt. Tabor, most of the West Hills—heck, even little ol' Corbett is nothing more than a pile of ash and steel and sooty, busted-up rebar.

The naturalists took down the zoo. Someone made a film of a pack of elephants crunching through the remains of the old Zupan's down on Macadam. I can't imagine what happened to the big cats.

The four of us had taken to the basement of our house. Dad boarded up the windows and doors—from the *inside*. I have to give him credit. He *hates* guns, but he went to Wal-Mart and purchased the shotgun really early on in this whole mess. Billy's

revolver we found in a house in Sandy, but the shotgun was Dad thinking this through from the very start.

Anyway, there used to be this show on television about getting ready for disasters. We never watched it, but there was this thing they used to talk about that we came to value when everything hit the fan here in America.

The people on the show liked to talk about bug-out bags—basically, they were these backpacks filled with survival stuff. When the first cannibalism clusters showed up in Minneapolis, Grand Forks, Kalispell, and Spokane, we got our things together pretty quickly.

Six weeks later, the schools were shuttered. Six weeks after that, the fires started. We were asleep in the basement when the smoke detectors upstairs went off. We went out the back, through a corner window that was kind of tucked away, but the blighted were already out there waiting for us.

Dad had to use the gun. He actually used it a few times and we made it out of there, all four of us, even though we could tell that some of our neighbors hadn't been so lucky. Billy once told me that he saw Janie Kittredge just lying there in the street that night. Someone had hurt her really bad, and Mr. and Mrs. Kittredge were on their knees, just crying over their little girl, holding her there in the street for an instant before the blighted were upon them.

Billy said he saw it, and I believe him. When the blighted get their dander up, they can become positively savage.

Janie was in my class at OES, by the way. We used to sleep at each other's house all the time.

So we spent that first terrible night in an abandoned houseboat down on the south waterfront. Dad pulled the tether and we eventually beached on a little island a few miles downstream. We stayed inside for three full days, just watching the news—watching Portland fall apart.

Then, when night fell on the fourth day, we started for the mountain. We traveled by night, covering as much ground as we could. There were others like us—their flashlights telling the story—but we avoided them. Too dangerous. It was better just to circle the wagons, Dad said.

He had done a lot of work out in East County throughout the years, and had always talked about buying a cabin on the mountain. We walked for days before melting into the Mt. Hood National Forest.

We walked another ten days, pushing further into the wilderness, crammed into that little survival tent at night, before we found the cabin.

The road is just barely there. We're talking two microscopic dirt tracks. There are saplings growing right in the middle. It's not really navigable for anyone except for

maybe those hummers.

The owners had left the place alone for all of those years. There are two rooms and one old stone well filled with cold, sweet water. There's an outhouse and a little shed filled with hand tools.

It's home.

So there you have it. There's the *how*. You probably want to know the *why*, but that way lies madness, I think.

Why did this happen? How could that same God that I pray to every night when I pray for Mom to come back to us let these terrible things happen?

Gosh, it beats me. It really, seriously does.

But what I *do* know for sure is that it *did* happen. Heck, it's *still* happening. And that's all. I don't think I need to know much else, to be honest.

There's this old movie I used to love. It's called *Cloverfield*. It's about this crazy dinosaur that attacks New York. I remember this one time, Janie Kittredge slept over and we watched it. When the movie was finished, Janie said it was stupid and I asked her why she thought that.

She told me that it just didn't make any sense. "Why would that even happen?" she said. "Why on Earth would that creature even *exist*?"

I remember telling her then that the why didn't matter—that the why wasn't the point. What *did* matter was that it very certainly *was* happening, and the point was first acknowledging that, and then doing whatever it took to survive. Janie wasn't buying it, but I remember thinking, even way back then, that the why didn't matter.

The how did. How does one react to such trying circumstances? And how did we get here in the first place?

And so there you have it. That's the how.

For whatever it's worth...

Chapter Four: A Welcome Surprise

Dad just completely blew our minds this afternoon.

One of the hardest adjustments we've had to make through of all this is our shifting concept of time. Billy and I used to have structure in our lives. Each day was basically a series of carefully plotted points on a timeline—our lives neatly mapped out from soccer practice to soccer practice, from band rehearsal to band rehearsal.

Now? Well, now we have what feels like an eternity of time in every day.

But that doesn't mean we've lost our structure. We harvest edibles every single day. Mushrooms, ferns, berries. Dad keeps us busy with lessons that he plans for us each week. We study history and science, and he gets a real kick out of coming up with new ways to teach us geometry. I write about what's happening here in this journal, and I know that he looks over it when he finds the time (love you, Dad—stop lurking!).

And we're always on the lookout for food, fuel, and ammunition. That *never* changes. It's always there, in the back of our minds...

And so the time just kind of spins out there—our days governed by the sun and the moon and the stars, and not the watches on our wrists.

Only, it turns out that Dad's still been keeping track.

Today, he sent me and Billy out on the prowl. That's what he calls it—"the prowl." It's basically our little scavenger trips into the woods for food. We brought back the usual amount, taking only what we needed for the next few days, always mindful that we would need more soon.

And we found something really special, but more on that later.

We've grown really lean, Billy and me. We're kind of bordering on skin and bones, but not in a bad way. We're stronger now than we've ever been—our muscles stretching long, our skin tight on our frames. Our bodies are waaay more efficient, you see, and we can go pretty deep into the woods when we're out on the prowl. Today, we hiked from about two hours past dawn until well into the afternoon. I think we probably covered at least twenty miles, all told. That's just a guess, but we went all the way to the ninth waterfall. A few more miles and I think we might have caught a glimpse of the old lodge at Multnomah Falls.

So I guess what I'm getting at is that Dad had a *lot* of time to get things ready.

I should also mention here that ammunition is a really big deal for us. When we high-tailed it out of Portland, Dad had a single box of ammo. Since then, we've found

the equivalent of four more boxes of working shells for the shotgun. Billy has fourteen bullets for the revolver, all of them dry, but it's the shotgun that means the most to us.

The shotgun means food. It means *protein*, if Dad doesn't miss.

Remember when I mentioned those chickens that we traded for snakebite treatment? Well, Dad had built a little coop early on. We had seven birds—a rooster and six hens. We used the truck to take them from an abandoned hobby farm outside of Eagle Point. They were just about dead, and we nursed them back to health. Dad scavenged the chicken wire from an Ace Hardware in Sandy. He'd built what we thought was a sturdy little home for them, but it didn't hold. We awoke one morning in early summer to four hens clucking around the yard, clearly agitated. There was a hole in the wire, an explosion of feathers, and that was it.

Whatever had been at them had been efficient. We rebuilt the coop, but there were no more eggs. We ate two, traded the others off, and that was the end of our little farming experiment.

So I don't have to tell you that protein is at a premium around here.

There are other ways, of course. We eat the fish that Dad and Billy catch in the Sandy River, but with all the rain, the river's been out of shape for weeks. We haven't had a fresh steelhead in a month, and any dried fish we put by in the summer is long gone.

We come across the occasional can of protein—a can of chili here, some tuna there. It happens so rarely that we never bank on it. We can't afford to. No, we have to make our own way, and the ammunition is our best bet in that regard.

Dad has a few slugs, but mostly he has birdshot. He prefers the shot, I think, because he's not the best shooter, and it's not like he has the luxury of practice.

So Billy and I went deep, and we did a really good job. We picked red clover and a big batch of fiddleheads. We grabbed some chanterelles and some oyster mushrooms. And then, miracle of miracles, we were near the end of our prowl when Billy found them!

That they were still okay to eat should have tipped me off to the date, because I hadn't seen huckleberries in about a month. These were a little on the far side of ripe, but gosh they were good all the same! They speckled a big clump of shrubs along the banks of this little cold, clear stream that we hadn't ever followed before.

We took as much as we could carry. There was no guarantee that we would find the spot again, and it's been getting colder every night. I think we've been getting down into the thirties lately, and when we have our first major freeze, these little treasures will be lost to us until spring.

Huckleberries are wonderful, by the way—sweet and juicy, with a pleasant tartness to them. Mom used to bake them in muffins, and what I wouldn't give for one of those

right now, with a hot cup of tea and a warm pat of soft butter!

What I wouldn't give to see Mom again...

But anyway, Billy and me did a good job on *our* end, and we made the long hike back to the cabin filled with absolute pride. *We'd* take care of Dad tonight—make him a big mix of greens and some nice boiled mushrooms, with a side of huckleberries. That's a feast, friends.

And then we smelled it. Oh man, did we ever!

I caught the first whiff about a half mile from the cabin. My stomach buckled. I started drooling (no joke!), and my heart kicked into overdrive. Billy just stopped dead in his tracks. He sniffed the air and a grin lit his face like I hadn't seen in months.

"*Protein*," he said. There was a light in his eyes, and I caught a glimpse of the Billy I'd known when we were kids—a glimpse of the boy that was so quick to hug his parents and who would spend hours patiently playing with his kid sister.

Not the young man with a gun and fourteen bullets who believed his mother had become a cannibal.

"Protein!" he shouted, and we were off. Running is usually a no-no, except in obvious survival situations. We try to conserve calories—try to balance the needs of our bodies with the energy it takes to keep them running.

But there was no stopping us *this* afternoon. We tore through those woods, covering that last half mile in record time.

Dad must have sensed us coming, because he was sitting out front when we came down the road and into the little clearing in which our cabin sat.

He was smiling warmly, and it was *Dad*. I'm talking *old* Dad—happy Dad. Gosh, I won't ever forget it for as long as I live. In that moment, it was Dad—all the way, just like he used to be.

He opened his arms and we piled into him for the ultimate family hug.

"What *is* that?" Billy said. "It smells like...criminy, it's not chicken is it? Dad, is it... turkey? Is it!"

Dad laughed. "Bingo, Son," he said. "I have a surprise for you two. Come on in. I've been planning this all out. C'mon, Allie."

I thought he was going to scoop me up into his arms, and I have to be honest—it was all I really wanted in that moment. The sky was gray and the air was cold, and Billy and me were dog tired, but I was so happy right then that I wanted him to pick me up just like he did before I got too big. Instead, he knelt and kissed my cheek and

hugged me close, and his whiskers felt soft and warm against my face, and not at all scratchy.

It had been a very good day, and then it just kept getting better.

If we thought the smell was tantalizing outside the cabin, we were in no way prepared for what it was like on the inside. It was a sensory slap to the face, and my salivary glands went nuts.

The rich, unmistakable aroma of roasting turkey hung on the warm air. Dad had set the table, and he walked over and lit a pair of candles.

“So what’d you bring back?” he said, washing up in the water bucket at the sink. We didn’t get the juice back on until about forty minutes ago. I doubt there’s even any warm water yet at the cabin. “Let’s work on some side dishes, eh?”

Billy and I scrubbed our hands and helped him clean the haul. We worked together, shoulder to shoulder, building our feast. We had spices—the cabin had been stocked with a few groceries in its meager pantry—and dad sautéed the mushrooms in a little bit of chicken fat we’d been holding back. We salted the greens and simmered them down in a little bit of stream water before adding the mushrooms and making a kind of dressing.

Dad grinned as he opened the door of the woodstove. A bed of coals had been pushed to one side; on the other, a turkey wrapped in aluminum foil hissed and popped atop a roasting pan. There must have been a half inch of sizzling fat in there. My stomach howled, and Dad and Billy laughed at me.

“Should be ready in a few minutes,” Dad said. “C’mere. Take a look at this.”

With a dish towel, he lifted the top off an old cast-iron stewpot. Inside, cooking down in more chicken fat, were the turkey’s innards. Dad had made gravy. Honest-to-goodness gravy!

“I used a few tablespoons of the flour,” he said. It had been the best find in the cabin’s pantry, and we were running really low. “I thought the situation called for it.”

He wasn’t getting any arguments from us. I dunked a finger and tasted it, and I was suddenly right back home for an instant. It was Thanksgiving, that gravy!

When the turkey was finished roasting, he let it rest for about thirty minutes before carving it into generous portions and ladling gravy over the whole mess. He placed a platter of meat in the center of the table, grabbed the dressing we’d made, and told us to sit down and close our eyes.

I heard him making noise, heard the clinking of glass on glass, and when he told us to open our eyes, we each had a bottle of Yoo-hoo in front of our plates.

“Dad!” I said. “How on earth did you keep all of this a secret?”

As an answer, he pulled a pocket calendar from his sweater. There, circled in bright red magic marker, was the fourth Thursday in November. "It was a secret worth keeping, don't you think?" he said. We joined hands and bowed our heads.

"Lord, we are so very thankful for our unity and our health," Dad said. "We are thankful for a warm home, and for the pleasure of each other's company, and for this roof over our head. Please see it clear to bring..." his voice caught, just for a moment, "...to bring our Marjorie home to us. We are thankful for our daily hope that she is alive and okay, and that she knows how much we love and miss her. In Your name we pray, amen."

We concluded our prayer, content merely to hold hands a moment longer in the candlelight. "Happy Thanksgiving, kids," Dad said. He served us up and we toasted with the Yoo-hoos and dug in.

And man...did we ever eat.

Chapter Five: A Glimmer of Hope

So I guess the biggest news is that we're going to attempt to visit a man in the city—a doctor. Some claims have been made that we can't help but investigate for ourselves. I wish I could post here more often, but the power has been so sporadic lately, and the nights are getting a lot colder. I don't like making the hike up here as much when it's this cold. There's ice crusting on the edges of the creeks, and Billy and Dad and me have to really layer up when we head out on the prowl.

It's been four days since the euphoria of Thanksgiving, and Dad's been out hunting every morning since. We had no idea, but it turns out he's been scouting all sorts of waterfowl for a few weeks now. Our Dad, the mighty hunter! That would have been pretty hard to call a few years ago, I have to say. If we had more shells, I don't think we'd want for protein much at all anymore. A lot of the larger birds have left with the weather change, but there are still gulls coming off of the Columbia and there are loads and loads of ducks, of course. It's just a matter of picking out the birdshot, to hear him tell it.

And he thinks he knows where there are more turkeys, which is a really comforting thought. But they're wily creatures, those turkeys. He came up empty on a shot two days ago and I think he mourned for that spent shell—I really do.

Still...our bellies are mostly full and our spirits have been good since the holiday. These turkeys living on the mountain are actually kind of scrawny (we're not talking hormone-filled Buttberballs here), but we ate like pigs and then put some aside as well. We keep a cold box in the creek on the far side of the property for when the juice is off. So far, nothing has spoiled and, even though it's lumpy and it could really use some butter, that giblet gravy has been *sooo* good!

Hello, tummy! Do you remember what it was like to just walk right into the grocery store? To look around and see clean, fresh food? To walk down the aisles, a little bit of light music in the background, just studying the tantalizing pictures on the front of all those colorful boxes?

Do you remember hamburgers? You do? How about bacon double cheeseburgers?

Oh man. I need to stop this before the nostalgia becomes too much. It was such a short time ago...

Anyway, we learned about this guy Dr. Camille when we were in Sandy (we're just about done with our searching, by the way—that little town has been picked *clean*). This was just yesterday morning, and we'd had a really lucky day. We'd found some pretty useful stuff. There was a nice little bag of cornmeal and some yeast packets and baking soda. We found a little first-aid kit with iodine. There was a small bottle of chewable kids' vitamins. Billy found a really nice tackle box, which will come in handy

when the water levels drop in a few months. Dad found three cans of canned clams and a portable transistor radio with a hand-powered crank that actually worked.

The radio was a revelation. I've found a few sites on the X-NET that claimed to host radio content, but none of them actually worked. They were probably skeletons (I guess they're kind of like Billy and Dad and me in that way)—remnants of what once was a viable community. I haven't been able to make much out of the organization of the X-NET, by the way. There's no rhyme or reason as to why some sites seem to be filled with updated content (like this little journal, thank you very much!), while others are nothing more than hollow reflections of what they were when the worldwide web was *the* thing. It's not like I have a lot of time to research it, with the power coming and going the way it does, but it's still pretty fascinating to poke around and see how people are living. There is actually a little colony living on an island off the coast of Australia; supposedly, there are no traces of the blight! There are almost 30,000 healthy souls living there.

Then there is the other end of the spectrum. Remember that crazy insignia we saw on the side of the military vehicles all those weeks ago in Sandy? It is the sigul (Dad's word; who knows where he got *that* one) of the Rising Red. That's the name they've chosen for themselves.

Pretty stupid if you ask me.

If you read through the stuff on the X-NET (and believe me, I think Dad has spent more time up here than I have lately—at least, that's what the battery is telling me), they get all bent out of shape if you use the word "blight" when talking about what happened. They fancy themselves a new, hardier version of humanity. That's some serious delusion for you, but at least you now know what we do, and that's what they call themselves.

There are sites hosting out of Seattle, Denver, Jacksonville, Vancouver—it looks to me like they're the ones behind the X-NET. Heaven only knows when they'll figure out a way to hack my little ol' site here...

But I digress, and I can't afford to do that. We're getting ready to leave, you see. It's almost time to go into the city.

So anyway, we sat down at the kitchen table of an old farmhouse and switched the radio on. There was a little lake of dried blood on the floor and one set of bare footprints—small, heartbreaking footprints—heading out of the kitchen and off down the hallway.

We ignored it. After everything we've seen in the last few months, it's just another pattern in the linoleum. Your mileage will probably vary, of course, but I imagine you've adjusted at least a little to the new normal wherever you're reading this...

Dad thumbed through the dial and we listened. I haven't heard *anything* on the radio since the summer, and that's a real shame. Music goes a long way in lifting the

spirit. KINK was one of the last stations on the radio, bless their hearts, and they really tried to make a go of it, right up until the end.

The FM side was pure static, top to bottom. Not even a Ke\$ha jam to pass the time (I joke, I joke).

But the AM side was a *much* different story. The first hit was on the low end. We heard the crackle and pop of an old recording (Dad said something about vinyl). Some choir sang “Bringing in the Sheaves” with a warbling brass accompaniment. It was bad enough to elicit a group cringe, and then the song ended and a man with this weird, high-pitched voice came on and cried for a little bit while he read from the book of Revelation. There was no telling if he was crying because of what the blight had done to our part of the world, or if it was because he was showing early symptoms.

The cynic in each of us, I’m sure, assumed the latter. Anyway, he launched into a bunch of “amens” and “selahs” before putting on another hymn.

Sheesh. Time to move on.

The next broadcast chilled me to the bone. Just typing this out here sends a little shiver up my spine.

In a clinical, perfectly matter-of-fact tone, this woman read from a list. “In Olympia, there are thought to be in excess of sixteen hundred remnants, though there appears to be very little in the way of formal organization. There are reports, unconfirmed, of a sizable collective taking refuge in Capitol High School. General Ambrose, we trust, will soon investigate these reports. The following families have been reported as splintered, their remnants unknown: Abrams, Aikens, Allens—the families of both Ryan and Michael, Amundsons...”

Dad held us in place with his eyes. He was searching for an indication that we understood what we were hearing, and he certainly got it.

Suddenly, that farmhouse felt like a crypt. My heart hammered in my chest like it used to before a track-and-field event, and I looked over at Billy. He swallowed thickly, and I knew he was feeling the same thing.

The blighted (can’t call them the Red Rising...sorry, jerks) were organizing. Not only that, but they were actually *informing* on their own kin.

They were keeping a list—documenting their resources. Remember Dad’s theory of halves? Well, there must be some seriously empty bellies among the blighted as well. What they were talking about here amounted to genocide, although I don’t think that word really works when we’re talking about systems of food production.

Twenty minutes later and little miss cannibal robot moved on to a town call Omak. Omak’s list was much, *much* shorter.

We listened for a time, but other than those terrible lists, the woman offered no real insights into what life was like where the radio stations were up and running. Basically, we had the name of some guy named General Ambrose and the terrible feeling in our guts that our family's name might one day appear on the lips of that horrible woman.

Dad thumbed the dial and we found still a *third* station. It was a stronger, clearer signal—probably coming out of downtown Portland. I watched in wonder as a little smile formed on Dad's face. He recognized the voice.

"*That* doesn't change," the woman purred. Her voice was pure and smooth. It was vaguely familiar, and I could tell from his reaction that Billy had also heard her speak before. "These are *still* your family members, regardless of everything that has transpired. Regardless of all the terrible things they've done. They are *still* our brothers and sisters in humanity, and Dr. Camille's treatments can, possibly, restore them to you. I want to stress that these treatments represent possibilities—they represent hope. Will there be trying times along the way? Of course there will be. Of course. Nothing like the blight has ever happened in *our* lifetimes, but similar pandemics *have* happened before. Even when all of this is all over, it'll likely happen all over again.

"Fifty million people died in the flu pandemic of 1918. In 1968, a virus came out of Hong Kong that might have actually been an ancestor of the blight. And in..."

On and on she went, documenting the millions of people whose lives had become forfeit to organisms invisible to the naked eye. Dad put the macabre inventory aside, still smiling. "Do you kids know who that is?"

We shook our heads, and he laughed. "Well, of course you wouldn't. You're not exactly in her target demographic. That woman's name is Delilah. She used to have this late-night call-in show on the radio. Real lovey-dovey stuff. Folks would give her a sob story about a break-up or the loss of a family member, and she'd hit them with some Toto or a Whitney Houston song. Your mom and I would listen to it on the way back from Volcanoes games down in Salem. I can't believe she's on the radio. Heck, I'm surprised *anybody's* on the radio, but this is really strange. And it's got to be close—that's a really clear broadcast. I wonder what she's doing up here in the Northwest."

We turned our attention back to the radio. "...Dr. Camille's treatment has worked wonders. Early human trials have been successful beyond measure, with many, many blighted reporting the full reversal of all symptoms. The mortality rates have been, unfortunately, very high. A little more than 20% of trial participants do not survive the treatment. But still, that number is diminishing with every new cohort, and Dr. Camille believes he understands why these deaths are happening. The truth is, if you're afflicted with the blight and you have a strong constitution, it's time to come back into the city. It's time to allow yourself to be pre-screened at the Pearl Point Security Facility..."

"I have to go," Dad said, turning the radio down. "Look kids, this sounds too good to be true, but I'd be remiss if I didn't at least look into it."

“What if it’s a trap?” Billy said. “She might be some famous disc jockey from back in the day, Dad, but what if she’s working with them? I don’t think it’s a good idea. I think we should just stay here and wait for Mom to come home.”

Dad sighed. He looked on Billy right then with genuine pride. “That’s a great point, Son. I just got so excited by the possibility of it. News like this would bring survivors into the city in droves. But still...what if it’s true, huh? What if they’ve found a legitimate treatment?”

The idea of it just kind of hovered there for a long moment. I don’t know what the boys were thinking, but in that moment I was with Mom again in my mind. She was laughing at a cookout we’d had to celebrate the end of the school year, long before she’d felt the need to steal away from the family she loved with all her heart on some gray, miserable day on the side of Larch Mountain.

“We won’t let you go without us,” I said. I tried to muster as much conviction as I could, but I doubt I was all that convincing. I looked at Billy and he nodded his agreement, so I pushed forward. “We’re staying together, Dad, whatever we decide. You can ask us to stay behind—heck, you can *order* us to if you feel like it—but there’s no way you’ll ever know for sure if we will. And you don’t want us on our own out there, do you? Just following you, out there in the what’s left of the city?”

To this, he could only respond with another heavy sigh.

“How much fuel is left, Bill?” he said after a long minute.

“A little less than forty gallons. Way more than we’d need to get down into the city and stash the truck and get home safely.”

Dad’s eyes darted back and forth, searching the faces of his children for the resolve needed to risk the very worst. I couldn’t imagine what he must have been feeling as a parent right then.

“Okay,” he said, swallowing thickly. “Okay, we’ll sleep on it tonight and then push into the city tomorrow. We’ll hide the truck and approach this checkpoint on foot. What’s the address?”

“11th and Davis,” Billy replied without hesitation. The address was a tattoo on my mind as well, and I knew that Dad was just testing us. There was no way we were ever going to forget what that Delilah woman had just said on the radio.

Mom.

Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom....we’re *coming*, Mom.

“Let’s get the truck packed up then, kids. See if we can’t figure out what’s what down there in the city.”

As I type this, they're just finishing up the last of the preparations. It's an hour until darkness—an hour until we head down the mountain. We don't know where we'll be staying, of course, but if I find an X-NET hotspot you can be sure that I'll be back online here soon...

Chapter Six: A Glimpse of the City

So this is what happened.

If you're still following along here then you probably saw this coming. While I've tried to be as faithful as possible throughout this process (by making recordings and trying to add links and all that good stuff that any real historian *should* be doing), you'll just have to trust me from here on out that I'm reporting things faithfully. As Dad recently told me, history isn't exactly objective anyway.

So I'm posting this by the thin beam of a dying flashlight in the back room of a deserted bowling alley. We're locked in—barricaded with a heavy metal desk in front of the only entrance. Billy and Dad are here, and Billy has taken a nasty bullet wound to the shoulder. Dad says that it went clear through the skin and muscle without hitting any bone, so at least *that's* a blessing. Billy says it stings like crazy, but he seems to be handling it okay and the bleeding is under control.

There is the unmistakable musk of a hundred moldering bowling shoes wafting on the air.

Lovely.

Outside, all heck is breaking loose. It would appear that the blighted don't share our shortage of ammunition, which is just a *huge* bummer.

But here's the good news: we found him, and the treatments are real.

So, okay...let me backtrack again. We left the cabin four days ago, right at dusk. The truck is pretty noisy but Dad took it slow, trying to keep it stealth. We left the lights off and slunk down those logging trails like a pack of jewel thieves, never really pushing it over 15 or 20 MPH. Outside of a sizable herd of deer grazing in a high-mountain meadow, we didn't encounter another soul. The city loomed dark in the distance, with just a smattering of solar LEDs glowing from the exteriors of a few of the busted-up skyscrapers on the far side of the Willamette.

A dying town in a dying world, Portland is. So sad...

"I don't expect that they'll be rolling out the welcome mat," Billy said. Dad chuckled, but there was no humor in it. We were all on edge. Portland is danged scary, and I immediately missed the safety of the cabin. It occurred to me then that if we could just find Mom, we'd be able to make it fine there on the side of that mountain. It was an epiphany, and it felt really good to just let go of any misguided hope I had been holding onto that things would go back again to the way they were. So much for school. So much for soccer practice and grocery stores and piano lessons.

None of that mattered if we could all just be together again. That's what leaving the safety of the mountain taught me. It also taught me that people can be terrible, terrible monsters, but more on that later...

So we jounced our way down those rutted logging trails in the darkness. My brother sat shotgun, our actual shotgun in his lap. The closer you get to Gresham, the more you need to stick to the paved roads, but Dad got sneaky and cut through some alfalfa fields over by the college. It turns out that Mom used to work as an adjunct over at Mt. Hood Community College. They have an arboretum on the outskirts of campus that Dad used to take jogs in during the summer, and we found it and stuck to its dirt paths and avoided the entry onto Glisan altogether that way.

It took a few hours but we finally made it down off the mountain and, I have to be honest—it was *really* disorienting. After a couple of months spent looking down on everything, losing that vantage point gives a person a strange, vulnerable feeling. We rolled slowly through abandoned neighborhoods, most of them little more than ash-blackened husks.

We didn't speak. I think we were too scared to even risk it, as if breaking the silence would somehow coax the blighted out into the streets. If there *were* people there, they were content to simply let us pass. I kept expecting roadblocks and checkpoints (the blighted posting news out of Denver and Jacksonville seemed to have their cities almost completely locked down, if they were telling the truth), but I guess we were still too far out from the heart of the city.

"We have to get back to higher ground," Dad finally said. "We need a vantage point on the waterfront. Any thoughts?"

"How about Mt. Tabor?" I said. "We could maybe stow the truck in the park." Man, I loved the park there. We used to run cross country races—just the little short ones—up there in the fall.

Dad gave me a 1,000-watt grin and reached back to squeeze my hand, just as the first RPG glanced off the driver-side quarter-panel of the truck. Gunfire fractured the eerie quiet and I saw muzzle flashes in the distance. Dad and Billy ducked as webs of fractured glass laced the windshield. Head beneath the dash, Dad instinctively spun the wheel and the truck lurched into the nearest yard, where maybe half a dozen figures on foot sprinted straight toward us. I saw it all from my perch in the crew cab, and boy was it *horrible*. Dad punched it, shooting the truck right into them and I felt it rise and fall as we plowed those jerks down into the concrete. We clobbered through a back fence and into the neighbor's yard, catching a little air on a bit of garden bordering. "Guns, Billy! Guns!" he shouted, the truck fishtailing through flowerbeds.

My brother rolled his window down as we crossed the lawn. Staying low, he leaned a bit out the window and let the shotgun do its job. I watched a figure's head disappear in a crimson vapor. I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman because they wore scarves over their mouths and noses, and they were dressed all in black.

“Whoooo!” Billy hollered. He fired the gun again, screaming at the top of his lungs. I joined in, and then Dad was doing it too. We hooted and hollered to beat the band, and those folks must have wondered if a trio of demons straight from the fiery depths had somehow found a service elevator and the keys to a Chevy Silverado. If they were going to try to take us down, we’d put the ever-loving fear of God in them first (that’s a Mommism, by the way; I kind of like it), that was for sure.

We screamed like wild raiders as Dad pushed the truck through a back patio post, the whole works crashing down in a din behind us, and then around and into the side yard. There were others on foot here, and Dad swerved at the last minute to plow into a little group of them huddled around a burn barrel. We’d caught that sad little bunch completely off their guard, and it hurts me a little to say that it felt good watching a few of them go down under the front of the truck.

Billy reloaded. He leaned out the window, ready to unleash heck on these jerks, but they let us go. There were a few plinking ricochets sounding off the buildings around us, but we had made it through. Dad was cutting horizontally now through yards—thumping down off the curb and across the streets before blasting through fences and crashing straight through back yards. The engine strained, the speedometer climbing.

“Everybody okay? How about a systems check?” Dad said. He patted his chest, squeezed his biceps, touched the back of his head. It was just another surreal moment for me, doing a once-over on myself after a danged gunfight.

“Good!” Billy said. “*Damned* good, Dad! Whoooo! We made it!”

Dad flashed him a look, then broke into a grin before reaching over and squeezing his son’s shoulder.

“Allie?”

“Fine, Dad. Fancy driving back there.”

“Thanks, kiddo. Let’s, uh...let’s just disappear now, eh?”

He had the high beams on and he kept his foot down and, before too long, we were almost where we needed to be.

“That’s Yamhill there, Dad. Make a right. Right here,” Billy said, pointing. He was still breathing hard and I could tell that, despite it all, he was energized. My big brother had just killed somebody, and he looked ready to go another twelve rounds.

Sheesh.

Dad turned onto Yamhill. The park was pitch black, the shattered streetlights leading to the summit of Mt. Tabor like broken teeth in the truck’s high beams. Dad cut the lights off and then we were back in utter darkness.

"There's an old maintenance shed in the woods behind the basketball courts," Billy said. "We could maybe leave the truck there."

Dad nodded, and we climbed the 600 feet directly to the summit, busting into the park and angling through a labyrinth of hundred-year-old firs. The shed sat deep in a cluster of trees, thick brambles of blackberry vines staking a claim to the structure.

It sure *looked* deserted.

Dad put the truck in park. "You kids stay put. Billy—hand me the shotgun." He stepped out into the night. "Two minutes, Son. If I'm not back in two minutes, you get behind that wheel and head straight back to the cabin. Yeah?"

"Yeah," Billy replied. "Please, Dad...please be careful in there."

Dad nodded. "I love you both. Be right back."

He shut the door and we watched him run, hunched, toward the shed. He inched one of the large double doors open and slipped inside.

"Bi—" I started.

"Shhhh!" he snapped. "Not now, Allie."

He slid into the driver's seat, the pistol in his right hand.

I watched the digital clock embedded in the dash. 10:43.

We held our breath.

10:44.

"Crap," Billy said. He arranged his mirrors, the muscles of his jaw getting a workout.

10:45.

"Not yet," I whispered. "Not yet, Billy. You can't leave yet." I was crying. We'd lost Mom; we just couldn't lose Dad.

"You heard him," Billy said. "We've got to go, Allie." He jammed the transmission down into drive and began to turn the wheel just as Dad reappeared in the doorway. He had the shotgun and he was waving at us.

"He's there!" I screamed, tears streaming down my face. I completely lost it when I saw him. "Billy, he's there! Go!"

Billy let his breath go in a torrent. He'd been crying too, and I saw his lower lip quivering. "Jeez, Dad!" He turned the wheel and eased up on the brakes as Dad pulled the doors open and Billy slipped into the shed. Dad closed the doors behind us and we piled out of the truck and into the best family hug I've ever known.

When we'd finished squeezing each other half to death, Dad whispered, "Okay, here's the deal...we're not alone in here. Keep your cool, Son. These people? I just don't know yet. They seem okay, but..."

He closed the truck door and the dome light switched off, leaving us in perfect darkness. There was a swish of a match and, in the farthest corner of the cavernous shed, standing near a work bench and a row of tractors, a man lit a kerosene lamp. "Please—come on over here," he called out to us. His voice was weak. "I promise that we mean you no harm."

He had his family with him. Two young girls and a boy a few years younger than Billy. A tiny wife bordering on emaciation. He, too, was gaunt—a scarecrow rattling around in clothes at least two sizes too big.

"Come. Please. We mean you no harm." He motioned at us, and Dad touched Billy's forearm—staying his pistol.

"I'm Clifford Keane," Dad called. "These are my children, Allison and William. We," he dug in his pack and produced a handful of fiddlebacks, "have not contracted the blight."

He ate one and passed a few to each of us. We followed suit as we moved across the room, and I saw that trio of children staring at us with naked hunger.

"Ah," the man sighed, "she and I...we cannot break bread with you. Not in...not in that way, I'm afraid."

Billy's hand came up on instinct, the pistol trained on the man's head, even before the last word had left his mouth.

"No, Bill! Put the gun down!" Dad said.

"They're infected," Billy said. "This isn't *right*. I don't see how we—"

"They're going for treatment. Same place we're going. They...they want to travel with us."

Billy stopped. He stared at Dad, at the family, back at Dad. He lowered the gun and I could see the woman relax. She pulled her children close, dissolving in a flurry of sobs.

"Our children...maybe they have some sort of immunity? They haven't been touched by all of this—at least not yet. My name is Jack Wilson; this is my wife, Penny. The little one here is Mary, her sister is Ann, and Pete is our oldest. We...we're trying to get treatment. Just stopped in here to rest a minute."

"But it's been a whole *day*, Dad," Pete said. There was frustration in his voice and my heart began to ache for this family. Perhaps they were too weak to go any further.

"I know, Pete. I know," Wilson said, his smile strained. He coughed into his hand.

"How much farther is it?" Dad said.

"Farther?" Wilson replied. He wore a dreamy expression. "I'm sorry, Mr. Keane. Just...just lost concentration for a minute there. Do you...can you spare something to eat? For the children?"

Goodness, they were so hungry. I looked at the fern greens in the palm of my hand and offered them without a second thought.

"Allie, no," Dad said. "Just...just put them there, okay?" He motioned to an overturned plastic bucket, halfway between us. I piled them there while he went into his pack and pulled out a plastic bag filled with mushrooms and greens. He looked at Wilson. "We can share. Here...send them over."

Dad put healthy portions of food on the bucket, and we retreated while the kids came over and fell on it like carrion birds on roadkill. It was gone in seconds, and then they were back, huddling with their folks.

Smart Dad. It wouldn't do for us to get too close.

"How much farther?" Dad repeated.

"Oh. Yes, I'm sorry. And thanks so much for the food, Mr. Keane. I'd say just three or four more miles. Can I...can I ask you something?"

"Of course," Dad said. He put his pack back in the truck, the barrel of the shotgun still pointed at the floor. "What is it?"

Wilson looked at his wife and something very sad passed between them. "We're at our limit. We don't...we *won't* do what our condition calls for us to do survive. If we...if we don't make it into the Reclamation Zone, will you see that the kids get inside? We've been told there's food—medicine. We just..."

His words terminated there and he wept, his thin shoulders hitching with each sob. He pulled his son close and kissed the boy's temple, wrapping his other arm around his little girls. Criminy...

"We will, Jack. I promise you that we will. C'mon, now. Let's get back on the road so you can bring them inside on your own, okay? Can you two make it?"

Wilson swiped the tears from his cheeks. He smiled at his wife, who simply wore a dazed expression. She couldn't return the gesture. "We'll try. We waited too long to come into town, I think...but we'll try. Thank you, Mr. Keane. Thank you."

We gathered our packs and started out for... ah, shoot! Only 6% battery left. I'll try to get the rest of this in here when the juice is back up. Keep your heads down, if you're reading this, and stay *out* of Portland.

The place is a war zone...

Chapter Seven: Into the Reclamation Zone

The juice flipped back on about an hour ago. Hard to say, in light of everything that's happened, if that's a good thing or a bad thing, but at least there's a chance that I'll be able to get most of this down after all.

Somebody has been calling for help just outside of our room for the last thirty minutes or so. Billy and Dad just keep piling more stuff against the barricade every time that poor man screams. We thought about opening the door, but if the last few days have taught us anything, it's that trusting in others is foolish and the blighted can be pretty darned sneaky.

Sooo...let me just try to pick this back up where I left off.

We kept upwind of the Wilsons. Even though it was cold outside and the air was heavy with frozen fog, we just couldn't risk being near them.

Jack and Penny stumbled along behind us, Pete acting as a crutch for his mom. We kept an eye on them, but they were as harmless as a couple of kittens in the shape they were in.

We angled straight for Burnside. Jack said they'd cordoned off everything from the North Park Blocks to the northern end of the Pearl District. Bounded by the river to the east and the hills to the west, this was Dr. Camille's Reclamation Zone—the heart of emerging medicine in the battle against the blight.

Jack and Penny both stumbled a few times, but we actually made decent time. Dad said it was just after midnight when we encountered the recon team.

"Halt!" the lead man said. He had some seriously heavy artillery, and he was dressed for battle. He wore night-vision goggles like the kind you see on the movies and a camouflage helmet. Seven soldiers, similar guns at the ready, fanned out behind him. "Do any in your party carry the blight?"

"We're healthy," Dad called back, "but there are blighted among us. They need help right away. They're following behind us, just a few hundred yards back, and they have healthy children. The kids ate with us."

The man nodded. He stepped forward, the phalanx behind him keeping pace. "Share a bite with me, then?" he said. He pulled a bag of baby carrots out of a pocket in his flak jacket and my stomach lurched. Man, the sight of those little beauties made my mouth water.

Freaking carrots!

“Of course,” Dad said. He took one from the bag and popped it into his mouth without hesitation. Billy and I followed suit and the lead soldier smiled at us. He shook each of our hands and Dad gave him our names.

“May I?” I asked, motioning to the bag. He handed it to me and I had to fight the urge to scarf the entire thing down in a flurry of orange crumbs.

“Feel free,” he replied, laughing. “But save a few for the youngsters behind you. We always need to be sure.”

I felt terrible, having forgotten about the Wilsons. Sheesh. They needed the food much more than I did. I handed the bag back to the soldier without taking another, and he took it with an appreciative nod.

“So you say the parents are blighted?” he asked.

“They are,” Dad said. “And it seems that they haven’t eaten—*any* of them; at least it appears that way to me. The parents are willing to pass on instead. They...they just want to see that their kids are looked after.”

“Well, we might have remedies for all of them. Have to wait and see. Jimmy! Take Blutz and Aaron and go check on them. Full de-bug.” He handed a tall man the bag of carrots and, without a word, three soldiers peeled away from the group and jogged toward the Wilsons. I watched their approach. Just as they neared the little family, Penny crumpled forward in the street.

The soldiers pulled hazmat hoods from their packs and zipped them down over their faces.

One of the soldiers yanked a wand from a holster on his backpack and began to spray a fogged substance over the entire family. The kids shielded their faces while Jack Wilson knelt and pulled his wife into his arms.

When the soldier was finished delivering a thorough dousing, another swooped in and picked up Penny. The third took Jack’s arm and they hustled the parents away, not toward the checkpoint that was well lit on Burnside, but instead toward an old mission that had been cordoned off with chain-link fencing and razor wire. Jack held his youngest daughter’s hand for a tiny moment longer, the girl trailing after her parents, and then the man with the wand gently guided her back to her siblings. He produced the carrots and the kids tore into them. When they were finished, the last soldier guided them to the checkpoint, but they were routed toward a separate holding area.

“God speed,” Dad said, and the lead soldier nodded.

“My name is Captain James Perez,” he said. “We’re part of the security team here in the RZ. If you’ll follow me, Mr. Keane, I think we can get you set up with some modest accommodations.” He checked his watch. “Y’all must be pretty tired.”

"Thanks," Dad said. "It's been a long," he exhaled heavily, "...a long couple of months."

We walked with him to the checkpoint and passed through a series of chutes. We ate again with the soldiers inside and spent thirty minutes filling out paperwork. Vials of blood were taken. Our weapons were registered, our packs inventoried.

An hour later and a woman in a military uniform picked us up in a Toyota SUV. The streets there were well-lit and free of debris. Though the windows were dark, the buildings had been maintained. I pictured people sleeping inside, resting up for an actual day in the world.

"Welcome to the RZ," she said after we were buckled in. She headed west on Burnside, toward the hills. "I'm Captain Delia Ward. I report directly to Dr. Camille. May I ask you a question, Mr. Keane?"

"Of course."

"You and your children are healthy. Why did you risk coming into town?"

"Because we lost someone. We were hoping she might be here. Her name is Marjorie."

If Captain Ward knew Mom, she didn't let on. Her eyes alternated from the rearview, where she watched Billy and me in the backseat, and the road. "We'll sort that out later, then. For now, let's just get settled in."

She hooked a left into a parking garage and we piled out, grabbing our packs. A pair of nondescript brick buildings slumbered in the Portland night, though a doorman in a military uniform stood watch outside the foyer of each.

Uptown Apartments a sign read outside the larger of the two buildings.

"Home sweet home, at least for tonight," Ward said. "This way."

We followed her inside and took an actual elevator up to the third floor. It'd been so long that I forgot the butterflies you sometimes get when the lift gets going. We followed her down a long hallway and she let us inside a spacious apartment.

"Three bedrooms, so you can all have some privacy. Fridge is stocked, and there's hot water if you'd like a shower. You have the run of the place until we figure out our next step."

She smiled at us. "Again, welcome to the Reclamation Zone. I hope we can help you find your Marjorie, and that you feel at home with us here."

"Thank you," Dad said, the gratitude plain in his voice. Captain Ward nodded and departed, and Dad worked the dead bolt on the door. He put the shotgun in the corner of the room and collapsed to the floor with a sigh.

"We made it," he said. "C'mere, kids."

We went to him and he pulled us into a hug. I thought he might be laughing a little at first, stunned that we'd actually survived a trip into the city, but his thin shoulders instead shook with quiet sobs. Billy followed suit and what was left for me but to do the same? We cried for a little while, and then Dad got up and made us plates of cheesy eggs and toast. We took hot showers. When we were finished up and had clean clothes on—tee-shirts and underwear and socks, pulled fresh from brand new packages!—we said our goodnights and went to our separate rooms.

It was early in the morning—probably after 3:00—and I said a prayer for Mom and fell into the deepest, most restorative sleep I can recall since everything fell apart.

~0~

Dr. Camille visited us at 11:00 a.m. the following morning. Perez and Ward and two others we hadn't met yet accompanied him. Dad made coffee and cooked up the rest of the eggs, and we ate while the doctor and his attaché filled us in.

"California is a wasteland. It's much worse there than it is here," Camille said. He was a tall, thin man with a neat beard and moustache and kind brown eyes framed by gold-wired glasses. He wore slacks and a dress shirt beneath a white coat—in other words, he looked the way a doctor should look. "Washington is a much different story. The blighted there are well organized. They call themselves the —"

"The Red Rising," Dad interjected between bites of toast. "We know. We, uh...we heard one of their inventories on the radio. We've poked around a bit on the X-NET as well."

Camille nodded. "You heard them on the radio, huh? Pretty morbid stuff. Signal's coming out of Vancouver. So...you also must have heard one of our resident celebrities, am I right?"

Dad nodded. "What the heck is she doing here?"

Camille shrugged. "There are a few folks like that in the RZ. Two Trail Blazers live here with us. A pretty famous film director. An influential writer and some television stars. Miss Delilah. We learned a lot about California from her, actually. And her publicist was one of the first to survive the therapy. She's still in quarantine, but we're hoping the survivors of that cohort will remain stable and can join us here in due time. There have been some...abnormalities, but they've all experienced a total reversal of the virus's effects."

"How does it work?" Billy said.

"The treatment? It's simple blood therapy. Athletes have been doing this for years to recover from injury. You take some of the patient's blood and then clean and concentrate the material bodies—usually platelets for athletes, but we're taking both

platelets and white blood cells here—and re-inject the patient. In our case though, this is a pretty radical treatment. We cycle an *entire* supply of blood in forty-eight hours. It's why our mortality rates are so high, of course. It takes a lot of strength just to make it through the first few hours. If you wake up on the second day, there's about a 95% chance that you'll stick around."

"But it's worth it," a short, stocky man with thick sideburns said. "It's the only treatment currently showing signs of eliminating the blight."

"This is Reiner Marshall, my lead research assistant," Camille said. Marshall smiled and nodded at us. He seemed nice, and I sure hope he's still alive somewhere out there.

"And this," Camille said, pointing to a rail-thin man with angular features and perfectly gelled hair swept back off his forehead, "is Bryce Owens. He's my right-hand man. Keeps the lights on and the food in the fridge."

Owens wore a really nice wool suit. He smiled at us and it made me shudder a bit. His teeth were very long. He shook our hands, and his thin fingers were clammy.

Sheesh. That man...

We ate while Camille talked about the RZ and the goals of his project.

"We'd like to reverse the blight in as many patients as we can before making any kind of exodus to the south. Portland is still wide open, but the blighted are pretty much camped on our doorstep. Captain Perez blew the Columbia River Crossing and the Interstate Bridge on our side, but we're still vulnerable here. It's just a short boat ride. And it's not like they don't know about us. They just...they just haven't mounted an offensive yet."

"But we *are* expecting one," Perez added. "We're prepared if they come. But if we can get more folks like you—maybe get some of these cohorts back to help our cause," he shrugged. "There's power in numbers. I hope you'll consider standing here with us."

Camille nodded. "You're under no obligation to stay, but Bryce is doing a great job of running things around here. Not sure how he does it, but we have a steady stream of supplies. We actually enjoy a bit of the old life here."

Owens grinned again. "We cast a wide net, Dr. Camille. My scouts are very resourceful."

"And what about my wife? Her name is Marjorie Keane. Has she...has she made contact with you?"

Ward shook her head. "She's not inside the RZ, but we have located her. There's a synth camp up in Forest Park. We have visual confirmation that she's there, and she's

definitely listed on the camp's rolls. If you'd like to write her a letter, Mr. Keane, we can see that it gets to her."

Dad wiped his eyes and shook his head, he was so happy. I thought I was going to faint. Man, talk about relief. Mom was alive! Not only that, but she was close by!

"Is she okay?" Dad said. "Is she...what's a 'synth camp'?"

"She's hanging in there, based on what we've heard. But the synthesized...it's just not very nutritious. I don't think it will be long until your wife's body begins rejecting it. It's urgent that she come in for treatment, Mr. Keane. The sooner the better."

"But what is it? What is she actually doing to survive out there?"

"Synth is a liquid supplement. Remember Ensure? Well, this is the pure carnivore's version. A man named Allan Planter created it for the blighted that refused to succumb to the virus's barbaric side effects. He...well, unfortunately he died a few weeks ago. The synth is usually a cattle derivative. Sometimes, it's equine. The thing is, the patients can only subsist on it for a few weeks. Then the body rejects it. If the user doesn't want to indulge his or her urges, then we're talking about starvation here. The synth buys them some time, but based on everything we know, Marjorie's at the end of her rope. She's barely using at all right now."

"Dad, we have to go see her," I said. "We *have* to."

Billy agreed, but Dad silenced us with the palm of one raised hand. "I'll have the letter for you this afternoon. How soon until you can get her in here?"

"If she's willing to try treatment, we can admit her this afternoon. We'll get her a physical and some supplements, and we can begin right away. You can speak with her and be near her while she undergoes the treatment."

"We can see her today?"

Camille nodded. "Write the letter. We'll take it to her and see what she says. Forest Park is close, and we have a clean transport that leaves the RZ twice a day."

The five of them stood and we shook hands. I felt a little better about shaking Owens's hand the second time but, knowing everything I do now, I wish I'd followed my first instinct and said something to Dad and Billy about that guy...

They left and Dad asked Billy and me to clean up the kitchen. He disappeared into the back of the house for a long time, working on the letter, and when it was finished, we walked it down to the foyer and the soldier there called for someone to come and pick it up.

We thought we'd go out for a walk and so Billy and me...wait...oh, no. The walls are shaking. There's dust coming out of the ceiling tiles.

Right now, as I type this, the walls are shaking.

Someone's coming. We can hear them attacking the side of the building.

Someone's coming...

Chapter Eight: Reunion and Loss

Daylight.

After hours of running and hiding, here is what we know for sure: Dr. Camille is dead, and Billy is in a pretty bad way. His shoulder is bleeding again, and now it just won't seem to stop. We're maybe two or three miles away from the truck, and I'm not sure if Billy's got it in him to keep running.

Uh, *yeah*...this is bad.

We've been on our feet since the blighted took the bowling alley, and I think the plan is to catch some rest here if we can. There's some bedding that actually hasn't been completely ruined by all of the rain, and the roof is still mostly in tact over the bathroom and the little kitchenette. Billy's already crashed out, and Dad's right on the edge of sleep. He's holding Billy tight against his chest—holding him the way I imagine he must have when Bill was a baby and he and Mom kept him in their bed with them every night.

Dad keeps asking me to grab some rest, but I'm just too amped up. I'm too scared and too wired to do anything but get this all written down here, and I don't have much time. I just dipped under the 50% mark on battery power, and I'm kind of doubtful I'll be finding another plug-in. It's really sad to write that, but there's no use in sugarcoating it. That's kind of where we're at right now...

We found this X-NET hotspot in the ruins of an old Red Lion. *Something* must still be working down in the guts of this place. It's pretty creepy, hiding up here in one of the penthouse suites while the blighted scurry about below us, doing in Portland exactly what they did in Seattle. The eastern façade of the building is gone and there are hundreds of rooms exposed to a sheer drop down to the rubble below.

The sun is out, just now peeking above the edge of Mt. Hood. It's really beautiful and, if this is it for us, then at least we had *that*.

I've got to try to stay on task here. Sorry about the digressions. Mrs. Cranston would be seriously pulling her hair out reading this thing....

So here is the sad reality of it all—just a week ago we had it all and we didn't even know it. Sure, we were a little hungry, but there *was* food and we had each other.

Well, that is we had everything but Mom.

And then we came down off the mountain and we changed that. I mean, I haven't even gotten that far yet in talking about all of this, but the thing is that we *found* her.

Dr. Camille's team brought her back to the RZ, and we even spoke with her before things completely fell apart.

Now, I simply wish that we had never come. Billy's got blood trickling out of his mouth. It's not much, but it's there all the same and it was like that with Dr. Camille just before he died. Which was just *after* he told us about the hormones.

The danged hormones!

Here's my shot at spelling it—*auxin*. I'm pretty sure it's not "oxen," so there you have it. It's a plant hormone that stimulates growth in foundational cells—stem cells and t-cells and stuff like that. Dr. Camille and his research team were using trace amounts to augment the reconstituted blood. Mr. Marshall said something before Camille died about an "immune system on steroids," so it must have had a pretty big impact on the blighted.

The only problem was that it created a very specific set of side effects.

Behavioral side effects.

"They first manifested in cohort one nine days ago," Camille said. He coughed, a fine crimson mist speckling his filthy smock. He'd been shot in the stomach and, despite the best efforts of Captains Ward and Perez, he was hurt really badly.

"What are we talking about here?" Dad said.

We had reunited with Marshall, Camille, and Perez (in addition to about a dozen soldiers and civilian survivors) in an alley behind the ruins of the old Donut Queen on East Burnside. Man, I'd once had donuts and chocolate milk there after playing soccer in Buckman Park!

"Aggression," Camille said. "Diminished cognitive abilities. They...they attacked each other in their barracks. It was bad. The second cohort was beginning to exhibit some of the...some of the same behaviors when Owens opened the gates on us." He fell into another coughing fit and emerged on the other side of it wearing a macabre smile. "It's a fitting end for them, I suppose, given everything that has happened in the reclamation zone."

"But is it total?" Dad said. "Are these...behavioral changes presenting in *all* of the treatment subjects?"

Marshall nodded solemnly. "So far as we know. It was looking pretty grim when the blighted stormed the RZ. Auxin has a history of triggering some pretty extreme genetic responses. We just...we didn't know it until after the fact. It was still classified as a highly experimental supplement when the blight came screaming out of Asia..."

Dr. Camille's head lolled on his shoulders. He pulled Dad close and whispered something in his ear, and then he locked eyes with me and Billy and fell back on the concrete, unconscious. Perez and a couple of the soldiers carried him inside what

was left of the restaurant, and we learned an hour later that he was gone. Just like that, any hope we'd had for a treatment to the blight had vanished.

This was just...ah shoot, let me go back here for a minute and check my history.

Yeppers—did it again. Left out quite a bit, and now I'm backtracking. Sheesh, apologies...

Let's go back to our first day in the RZ.

Our first day with *her*.

Dad wrote the letter and we took a long walk. It was a great way to spend our first day back in civilization. There was a commissary and a large cafeteria. There was a school (alas, it was only for elementary-aged kids, but it's a start, right?) and a little make-shift library. There was a fitness facility where people inside were playing basketball and volleyball!

Ward showed us the medical district—four imposing square blocks quarantined behind thick coils of razor wire where people in clean suits (they looked like Earth astronauts—seriously...) moved between the buildings.

We hiked up to the northern edge of the West Hills and found people working together to clean out some of the nice old homes up there off 23rd. They were rebuilding, and we pitched in until a siren sounded at noon and everyone walked back down into the heart of the RZ for a lunch of hot potato soup and crunchy sourdough bread and even a bit of savory bacon and cheese. Criminy, it was so good and there was enough to have seconds!

We were back in our room after lunch when Ward brought us the good news. I'd spent the afternoon surfing the X-NET while Dad and Billy played chess.

"Your wife is here, Mr. Keane. She came in on the afternoon transport," Ward said, smiling at my father. "If you and the kids are okay with suiting up, she'd like to see you all before taking the next step."

Dad's smile in that moment had been as bright as the sun over Mt. Hood was this morning. Man, it was just awesome to see that! We grabbed our coats and were on our way.

They doused us with that fogging chemical stuff and we shrugged into clean suits and then we were following a nurse through a warren of antiseptic hallways. Most of the doors were open and I saw patient after patient connected to machines. Most were sleeping, but some just lay there weakly in their beds, looking at the ceiling, or straight ahead at seemingly nothing at all.

"Room 319," the nurse said. She opened the door, and there *she* was.

Mom.

"You have ten minutes. I wish it was more, but her condition is pretty fragile. We need to get her on a platelet drip as soon as possible in order to get her prepped for her treatment."

Mom smiled weakly as we piled into the room. Her eyes were wet, and she put her arms around me when I went to her. She was so thin. Her chest, when it rose, felt as brittle as parchment paper.

"Allie," she whispered, the tears now sliding down her cheeks. "Allie bird, you're so thin. What happened, sweet girl?"

"I'm okay, Mom," I replied, my voice shaking. "I'm fine. Dad and Billy are taking good care of me. We...we came back for *you*, Mom. We're going to bring you home—back to the cabin with us."

"I know that, Allie bird," Mom said. "I knew you'd come and find me." I'd never seen someone so thin up close. Her eyes were threaded through with little red veins, her once-beautiful hair now incredibly thin. When she smiled, her cracked lips did nothing to pad the cheekbones that protruded from her skin.

Her collar bones, her arms, the tiny bones in her neck—I've never seen anything like it.

"Send your brother over here, Allie bird."

"I love you, Mom."

"I love you too, Allie. So much, bunches and bunches."

I lost it then. She'd said that to me every single day for as long as I could remember. Careful not to hurt her, I gave her another hug and let Billy slip in for his own reunion. They spoke for three or four minutes, and then Dad went to her and he held her hand. He traced the curve of her jaw, tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear.

They just held hands, saying nothing and crying a little. When the nurse came back, Dad leaned in and told her he'd stay with her through the treatment. She wiped the tears away and nodded at him, and that was the last we saw of her.

That was three days ago. Three days ago, when things had seemed like they might actually work out.

We'd eaten dinner—tofu tacos and refried beans and honest-to-goodness pasteurized cow milk—with the rest of the community and then Billy and I had gone back to our room while Dad spent the night at Mom's bedside.

"This is going to work," Billy said. I'd been whooping his butt at chess again and he was going through the motions of falling on the sword. "I can feel it, Allie. We're going to get her back, and then we're all getting the hell out of here."

“I sure hope so,” I said. I remember now, just typing this out here, having this really dark feeling down deep inside that things *wouldn't* be okay—that things, in fact, were going to get much, much worse before it was all said and done.

And I hate to say I told you so.

Oh, oh...there's a yawn. Been up way too long yet, and there's still such a long way to go. I'm going to (criminy...just yawned again—can't stop once you get started, right?) close my eyes for just a few minutes here. Got to rest up if we're going to get back to the truck, after all.

It's our only chance.

Who knows? Maybe things *will* go our way after all. Despite everything I've seen in the last few days, maybe everything will come out okay in the end, right?

Right?

Chapter Nine: Inside the Mouth of the Lion

They confiscated my laptop but, as you can tell, we're not completely without resources over here in Veggieville.

Great name, huh?

The blighted (they'll shoot you on the spot if they hear you so much as whisper the word "blight," but I'll be damned—sorry, Dad—if I switch it up now) came up with that jovial little moniker for this particular holding pen. They call them "reeducation camps" (Dad said that's a little nod to a war that happened a long time before I was born), but they're really nothing more than ranches.

That's right. Consider us cattle...

Veggieville is nothing more than the gutted shell of the old soccer stadium. Dad used to take us to Portland Timbers games here. Now, we sleep in a tent near the spot where the players would take the northeast corner kick.

There are probably seven or eight thousand of us being held here. Men make up the greatest number of survivors, but there are plenty of women and children as well.

I've actually made some friends, but I haven't seen anyone yet from OES. No Mrs. Cranston. No Principal Webber. No Coach Bell.

Nobody from our old neighborhood.

We've been stuck here in Veggieville for eight days. It's been long enough to know a few things about what it means to be "reeducated."

We understand that, despite their vague inferences to the contrary, they have no intention of converting us. We'll no sooner be exposed to the blight than we'll be given an all-expenses-paid trip to join the rest of the remnants in the green colonies (oh yeah, they *do* exist...). In fact, they have taken great pains to ensure that we won't even sniff exposure.

How do they do it, you might ask? Good question, dear readers. General Ambrose has turned about two dozen of our ranks *against* us. These surrogates operate as the voice, the mind, and the fist of the blighted leadership for as long as we're stuck here in captivity. They carry weapons. They give orders. They dispense punishment and dole out the pitiful remunerations that serve as rewards around here. Dad has wondered a few times out loud what they were promised in order to betray us, but nobody seems to have any idea *why* they've chosen to throw in with the blighted.

Maybe they arranged to be on that last truck to the cannery. Who knows?

There is a man stuck inside here with us—Dad calls him a genius, and he's not one to blow things like that out of proportion—who has managed to outsmart their X-NET filters. I won't type his name out here, but he was kind of a big deal back before the blight. He heard about my record, and he has promised me as much time as I'm apt to have left to use his technology and get things right.

And that's just what I intend to do.

First thing's first. Billy's getting better. Dad was really worried about infection in those first days after the Red Lion, but big bro seems to have turned a corner, thank goodness. He's just as ornery as ever, which fills me with hope. But his energy...gosh, he gets tired pretty easily. Even if those traitorous goons didn't have those automatic rifles, I'm not sure we could even make good time back up to Mt. Tabor if the situation presented itself.

And then there's Mom. She's reached out to us twice, both times in writing.

More about her in a little while.

Man, we never should have come here...

In reading back through all of this, I see that I've missed a few pretty important details. You'll have to forgive me—I'm still a few weeks away from that magical thirteenth birthday. Age is no excuse for an incomplete record, but it's what I've got, so I'm using it...

Mom survived her treatment. Camille and Marshall and Dad took turns staying with her through every minute of that first day. Dad said that her heart stopped twice, and both times Dr. Camille brought her back from the edge.

I wasn't allowed to see her, but it wouldn't have mattered anyway. Dad said she had a respirator tube in her mouth, and she couldn't speak. Still, I'm sad that I wasn't able to say goodbye.

Mom, I love you. I know you're out there, and I know *you* still love us.

Please, Mom. I know you're reading this. I'm your *daughter*, your Allie bird...

Please.

Anyway, it was touch and go, as they like to say, for two days. Billy and I kept ourselves busy, just praying from time to time that Mom would make it out okay. We met up with a couple of nice people that were leading the efforts to restore some of the homes up in the hills. Owens's scouts had brought back an entire truckload of building supplies, and we spent an afternoon ripping out charred two-by-fours with a couple of other kids our age.

It was happy, destructive, messy fun. I had no idea how much I might have enjoyed working in construction if things had turned out differently.

On our third night in town, we actually met up with Pete and his sisters at dinner.

“Quarantine was kind of rough,” he said. He had dark circles under his eyes, and I’m sure they’d all been crying recently. “Seventy-two hours of isolation. They separated us. It was...it was pretty hard being away from each other.”

Little Annie nodded. “Lots of kids were crying in there. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever see Pete and Mary *again*.”

“What about your folks?” Billy asked. “Are they okay?”

Pete shrugged and looked away, and that was that. We ate with them and it was nice. Very pleasant. It was reassuring to know that there was an actual *system* in place, you know? Smart people were using science and medicine to give the remnants a chance to move forward.

We were working on dessert—some yummy sheet cake and ice cream for me and the girls, and coffee for Dad, Billy, and Pete—when things went crazy.

Dr. Camille had a habit of giving a nightly debriefing after the supper dishes had been cleared. Without mentioning names, he would stand and grab a microphone and run through the successes and losses in the medical district before concluding with some positive comments on the future of our (yes, I’d already come to think of it that way, and that makes me feel a little bit silly to write that down here) little community.

In just those few days, I’d come to understand that there were inevitable deaths every night, but there were also many more success stories. There were now *eight* cohorts of blighted patients convalescing inside the RZ. The first three were consuming almost exclusively an herbivoracious diet. Dr. Camille said they were rebuilding their strength. After most of a year away from fruits and vegetables, it was a pretty bumpy road back to reintroduction.

On that terrible night, Dr. Camille stood to give his speech and had just opened his mouth when gunshots echoed through the cafeteria. Had it happened outside of the RZ, I doubt our reaction would have been so lazy. But even in the short time we’d been there, we’d been conditioned to...well, to *relax*, I guess. Just three days inside, and the sound of a gunshot had already taken on the feeling of something like a scene out of a play, or some elaborate hoax.

Only this was no play. One of the bullets winged Captain Perez. The soldier sitting next to him took a bullet in the face, and then people were scrambling and ducking under the tables. It was terrible, and Perez snapped right into it and returned fire with his pistol. It was one of Owens’s scouts that had started the shooting, a large man with this creepy pale skin who had never said so much as a word to me or Billy, even though we had seen him every day since our first morning in the RZ.

It became suddenly clear why Owens had enjoyed such success while out on his supply-gathering missions. The bastard (sorry again, Dad) had sold us out to General Ambrose, and after Perez eliminated the shooter and we all began to scatter,

streaming out of that building like rats out of the proverbial sinking ship, we understood in full what the blighted were capable of.

They'd come ashore somewhere north of the RZ, and they streamed into our community through every adjacent street in what used to be Chinatown. Ambushing us in the cafeteria was perfect. It was like shooting fish in a barrel, and they could take down a couple of hundred targets without much resistance.

I longed for the shotgun and Billy's pistol. They're still in the Uptown Apartments, if anyone reading this is crazy enough to go after them. They're upstairs, and I bet you that they work, for whatever it's worth. Dad was always a stickler about cleaning and oiling that gun.

"Kids!" Dad yelled, and we followed him south, keeping our heads down. A throng of remnants was heading for the bridge, and you know the old adage about safety in numbers. Well, when we got there, they opened fire on us. Billy took that shot in the shoulder. It was enough to take him up and off of his feet, and Dad and I had to stop and cover his body while panicked remnants stepped on, over, and through us on their desperate quest to make it to the bridge.

In actuality, Billy's wound probably saved our lives. We'd been at the front of the cavalcade. Had we not stopped to tend to my brother, we'd have been cut down by the blighted Ambrose had positioned there to flank us at the bridge.

They unleashed hell on the remnants at the front, but there were still so many of us that it didn't take us long to breach the far end of the bridge. By the time Dad and Billy and me had snuck through, scores of both blighted and remnants lay dead in the street.

We kept our eyes straight ahead, though, and we slunk through the night until finding that brief respite in the Red Lion.

From there, it was just a matter of time. The blighted fanned out throughout Portland. They moved methodically through the husk of the hotel, turning out disheveled little pockets of people like us. We gave ourselves up when the man with the bullhorn began his spiel about Veggieville for what felt like the four hundredth time.

And there you have it. Well, actually I guess that's *most* of it. There's still that little bit to tell about the canneries.

The blighted are ravenous. They're as hungry as we are. Maybe more so, as it turns out. You see, according to the X-Net there are some seriously large and prosperous colonies of remnants out there. There's a big one in Utah, and another in Idaho. Those are the closest to us, but they're sprouting up all over.

People are rebuilding.

They're farming. They're ranching. They're *thriving*.

Only, now it's the blighted that are struggling. For them, food is most certainly a finite resource. My techie friend showed me a pretty interesting story just this morning here on the X-NET.

TWELVE BUTCHERED IN CARAVAN NEAR JOHNSON CITY

That's kind of a garden-variety X-NET headline nowadays, only this one wasn't about a group of unfortunate remnants biting the dust.

No siree, that little story detailed a military attachment of the *Red Rising* that was ambushed by another platoon. Another platoon within their own ranks!

Dad's theory of halves might very well be playing itself out, only it's the blighted, it seems, that are destined for extinction.

Dieback. Remember that little beauty?

Well, it's happening folks. If only we could hang on a little bit longer...

Oh, so back to the canneries. The blighted have repurposed the old Del Monte factory up near Lombard. Every morning, two large trucks visit us here at Veggieville. Every morning, our number is reduced by eighty.

Less than half that many are brought in on a daily basis. You do the math. This won't end well for us, but it's not going to end well for them either. At least there's *that*, right?

The X-NET is humming with images and news about what's going on out there. As it turns out, it was folks like my fine benefactor here that actually got things back online. Anyway, you can do the research yourself, but this is just [one photograph](#) that came up just this morning. I'm not saying that you should take a look at it, because it's really gross and I had to fight to hang onto my breakfast bar after I saw it, but it might put some things in perspective for you—if perspective's really what you need at this late hour.

Speaking of perspective, I asked Dad about that last night. He and Billy and I were laying out, watching the stars emerge from the darkness. We've had two dry nights in a row. It's cold as all get out, but at least we've been dry.

"What did Dr. Camille say to you, Dad? Right before he died."

Dad swallowed. He took my hand. He took Billy's. "He told me to run. He said to take you kids and run away and not to ever look back. He said," his voice caught, "he said that Mom wouldn't be the same to us. That we had lost her. He told me to get you kids out of the city, and that things would work themselves out in time."

Billy and me didn't have much to say to that. I gave Dad's hand a squeeze and he returned the favor, and then we went to bed shortly after that. I think I dreamed about the cabin last night. Man, I just want to go home.

So Dr. Camille said that things will work themselves out in time. Huh.

Speaking of time, you want to hear something crazy? It's almost Christmas. Just a few shopping days left for all of you procrastinators out there (har-de-har-har, right?)...

In all seriousness, time is a funny concept.

In one year's time, the world fell apart. Just one little measly year. So where will be *next* Christmas?

Will we be next Christmas?

Mom?

Are your reading this?

Mom?

Chapter Ten: Life in Veggieville

A pack of remnants tried to take down the guards last night. They were promptly executed. The guards disemboweled the one they claimed to be the leader. They left the poor man out there in the rain, content to let him die slowly, and he howled for help for most of the morning.

Life in camp is hard.

We eat three times a day, if you can call it that. A breakfast bar in the morning—another at noon. We eat warm “food” at night. If they’re trying to fatten us up for the canneries, they sure aren’t doing a very good job of it.

Last night was boiled cabbage and boiled chicken.

The trucks come in the morning; they take people away. It’s terrible, and there is a lot of crying around camp.

But the place isn’t utterly without hope. I’m writing this out here on a technology that hasn’t ever appeared on the market before. It’s a brand new deal, a prototype, and the blighted won’t be able to confiscate it because they’ll never even be able to *find* it.

That’s right, you idiots. I know that you’re out there reading this, and I know for sure that you’ve tried to hack my site. I know you’ve tried to block the X-NET feeds into Veggieville.

You might have captured us, but you can’t silence us. The world will know, and one day they will come for us. It’s only a matter of time.

According to some figures coming out of the green colony in Salt Lake City, there are an estimated *four million* blighted now living in the I-5 corridor, from Salem up to Vancouver, B.C., in Canada.

Four million may seem like a lot, but when things go south, I think they’ll go south pretty quickly. There are more than twice as many remnants living in the green colonies, and they are building a war machine.

Things are about to get very interesting.

So will we be around to see it?

Well, let me tell you about Mom’s letters. The first was a request for us to join her. A simple blood transfusion would ensure the deal, and then we could all be together again.

Simple as that.

You see, Dr. Camille's treatment didn't quite eradicate her illness. Sure, she won't rely solely on the products of the canneries on Lombard Street for her survival anymore, but it turns out that, at least in the short term, she actually prefers her new period of "enlightenment."

That's how she put it in her note to Dad. *"Cliff, I feel stronger than I ever have before. I know it sounds bizarre, but this virus has given me a new perspective. I feel...enlightened."*

Dad wrote her back, of course, begging her to come to her senses. Begging her to use her influence with the Red Rising to get us out of here.

He begged her to come back to help us. To save us.

Her reply was very short.

It was simply a goodbye.

And I can't accept that, Mom. I can't accept goodbye. Not me—not your Allie bird.

Not from *you*, damn it. You're our *mother*!

We came *back* for you, Mom. We came back to bring you home.

Can't you see how you're hurting us?

I...wait just a sec. There's some kind of commotion over at the far gates. The guards are shooting.

That's never good, but hopefully it's just a minor deal. They always seem a little bit testy in the morning, and there's been a little more push back from some of us here in the stadium lately. Clearly, that attack last night didn't leave them in good spirits.

Ambrose keeps making promises, and nothing ever gets done...it's no wonder that folks are talking about revolution. It's that, or it's the trucks. What would you do?

Oh...

Something's definitely happening out there. It's chaos, even from my perspective in the back of Miller's tent. It looks like the blighted are actually *here*—there are soldiers in red, and they're not shy about using their rifles. Remnants are surging for the walls, scrambling over each other in an attempt to get out of here.

I've got to go find Dad and Billy. I'm not sure if I will be able to finish writing this, as it looks li

Greetings!

My name is Marjorie Keane. Perhaps you've heard of me.

My Allie bird has been quite the busy little bee, has she not?

That kid! What a good little girl she was. She always has been a bit of a scribbler. I'm glad that she was able to get so much accomplished here. I think, for the most part, that her accounting has been quite thorough. Her beloved Mrs. Cranston would approve.

With that being said, I think it's time to finally conclude this little journal here. No doubt you're wondering where my little Allie bird and her brother and my dear husband have gotten off to.

Why, a truck took them away about an hour ago.

Let this note be a lesson. Those standing against the tides of progress will be met with terrible force.

Such is the new reality of survival.

And what of love, you might ask? What place is there for love in the world that is now emerging?

Oh, don't fear—love *remains*. It persists. I think I shall *love* my dear Allie bird and her noble brother William and my fine husband Clifford *forever*. They will, as a point of fact, be with me for all the rest of my days.

In fact, I think it's very likely that I'll *never* have a better family—not a one in all of these many years still ahead of me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel teaches a variety of writing courses at Florida State College at Jacksonville. He is entering the second year of a doctoral program in digital media studies at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, and is working on a horror novel set high in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. His short stories have been collected in [*These Strange Worlds: Fourteen Dark Tales*](#) and [*The Silver Coast and Other Stories*](#). You can learn more about upcoming writing projects at [*The Byproduct*](#), Daniel's web journal on speculative storytelling.

Other works include:

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